

ICER

UPDATE

INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL AND EPIDEMIOLOGIC RESEARCH

Volume III, No. 1.

VAMC, Durham, North Carolina

Spring 2000

ERIC News

ERIC to Lead ALS Study

The Durham ERIC is conducting a one year nationwide study to determine the rate of ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, among military veterans who were on active duty during the Persian Gulf War. The study began in March in collaboration with the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), along with advice from the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association. Ron Horner, Ph.D., Director of the Durham ERIC, is the study's principal investigator.

The one year study hopes to determine if ALS occurs at a higher than expected rate among Gulf War veterans, some of whom have raised concerns about possible association between ALS and service in the conflict. VA and DoD clinicians have identified 28 patients with possible ALS among the 697,000 who were deployed to the Gulf War region during that conflict. The ALS Association estimates the prevalence of ALS in the United States to be between six and eight cases per 100,000 persons.

A specific research objective of the study will be to establish as completely as possible, through a nationwide survey, the number of cases of ALS among Gulf War veterans. It also hopes to determine whether ALS among Gulf War veterans may be due to environmental factors in the Persian Gulf area, either alone, or in combination with a genetic-based susceptibility to neurodegenerative disorders. Veterans under 45 years of age with ALS are of particular interest to the project because ALS is rare in this age group.

All Gulf War era veterans who were on active-duty, including activated reserves and National Guard personnel, between August 2, 1990, and July 31, 1991, regardless of whether they were actually deployed to the Gulf War region and have received a medical diagnosis of ALS during or after this period, are eligible for the study.

ALS is a fatal neurodegenerative disease that attacks and kills brain and spinal cord cells that control muscle movement. As the brain and spinal cord nerve cells die, the affected muscles weaken and then shrink, with rapid, progressive, and severe paralysis then occurring. There is no known cause or cure for ALS. It is a non-contagious, adult-onset disease and is rare among individuals under 45 years of age.

The study was announced March 27th through a national press release and has since received nationwide media attention.

For information about ALS, contact the ALS Association at: 1-800-782-4747 or visit their website at: <http://www.alsa.org/>.

Eligible veterans, or family and friends of eligible veterans are asked to call VA study coordinators, toll-free, at: 1-877-342-5257; e-mail them at dawnhoward@mindspring.com; or visit their website at <http://hsrd.durham.med.va.gov/eric/als/als.htm>

Epidemiologist and Project Coordinator for ERIC ALS Study

We would like to welcome two new members of the ERIC team, Kimberly Ann Gray, Ph.D., and Dawn L. Howard, M.S.P.H. Both members are working with Dr. Ron Horner on the ERIC's new Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) study.

Dr. Gray will act as the study's neuro-epidemiologist (neuro-epidemiology is the epidemiological study of neurological diseases). Dr. Gray received her B.S. in Behavioral Neuroscience in 1988 from the University of

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Pittsburgh. She also earned her Ph.D. in Epidemiology in 1998 from the University of Pittsburgh, where she was a pre-doctoral trainee in the Department of Epidemiology, Alcohol and Psychiatric Epidemiology, from 1995 to 1998. While there, she was awarded the student fellowship in alcohol research on the Maternal Health Practices and Child Development project, a longitudinal study of women from the fourth month of pregnancy to delivery and with their offspring from birth to 16 years of age. Starting in



Kimberly Gray, Ph.D.

1998, Dr. Gray was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Epidemiology Branch of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Between undergraduate and graduate school from 1988 through 1991, Dr. Gray was a research associate in the Anesthesia Department at the University of Pittsburgh, and from 1991 to 1993 was a research specialist in the Neurophysics Laboratory at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic. She is a student member of the Neurobehavioral Teratology Society, the Research Society on Alcoholism, the Society of Research on Child Development, and the Society of Epidemiological Research.

Dawn Howard, the ALS Study Project Coordinator, received her B.S. in Biology from Spellman College in 1991. Between undergraduate and graduate school, she was a biological laboratory technician for the Centers of Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. She received her M.S.P.H. in Epidemiology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Public Health in 1994, where she was a Patricia Roberts Harris Fellow. From 1995 through 1996 Ms. Howard worked as a research assistant with the Injury Prevention Research Center at UNC-Chapel Hill, and was an epidemiologist for the North Carolina Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources in 1996. Starting in 1996, Ms. Howard was an epidemiologist for the Research Triangle Institute and in 1999 was an adjunct lecturer and instructor at UNC Greensboro and NC Central University respectively. She is a co-author of the article "Medical examiner cases associated with previously undiagnosed diabetes mellitus



Dawn Howard, M.S.P.H.

– North Carolina, 1994" Southern Medical Journal, and is lead author for the article "An assessment of factors influencing sedentary lifestyle among Wake County, North Carolina residents" submitted to the American Journal of Health Promotion.

Center News

Career Development Award for Dawn Provenzale, MD, MS, Ends

Dawn Provenzale, MD, MSPH, has completed the sixth and final year of her HSR&D Career Development Award. She remains on staff with the Durham VA Medical Center and is continuing her funded research projects and her clinical work with veterans.

"My current focus actually is a continuation of the career award," Dr. Provenzale said in a recent interview. "It's a series of projects related to screening and surveillance for gastrointestinal malignancies namely, esophageal carcinoma, colon cancer in patients with ulcerative colitis, and colon cancer in the general population."

"In addition to continuing my current project, another component of my activities, which was also established during the career award, is the development of a training program for our GI fellows who are interested in Health Services Research. I'll continue as a mentor to upcoming GI fellows who are committed to careers in Health Services Research. They will be involved in either the HSR&D fellowships at the VA, or the NIH funded fellowship through the HSR&D field program. So I'll continue to work in the field program not only conducting my research activities but as a mentor to GI fellows who come through the training programs here. I spend the remainder of my time in clinical service in the gastroenterology division at the VA."

Dr. Provenzale came to the Durham as an assistant professor of medicine at Duke University and as a VA staff physician in 1992. She received her initial HSR&D Career Development Award in April, 1994. She says that the most valuable aspect of the Career Development Program has been the freedom it allowed her to achieve her overall goals. "The award provided me not only with the protected time that I needed to develop my research program into gastrointestinal cancer screening and surveillance, but also provided me with the opportunity to interact with others who are interested in similar types of research. I got to work closely with statisticians, epidemiologists, and other MD researchers."

Her plans for the future are to stay the course. "I'm planning a series of projects related to quality of life of patients who undergo screening and surveillance, and an economic analysis of this process."

Jaya Rao, MD, MHSc, Leaving Durham HSR&D

Jaya Rao, MD, MHSc, is leaving HSR&D at the Durham VA Medical Center at the end of June to take a position with the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. She will be based in the Division of Adult and Community Health and will develop a section that performs Health Sciences Research studies in managed care and academic settings. "My general focus will be to perform Health Services Research studies focusing on public health issues, specifically prevention and health promotion, relevant to people with chronic disease," says Dr. Rao. "I plan to evaluate interventions that assist patients to self-manage symptoms of chronic disease, such as arthritis, and interventions that assist physicians in implementing the Healthy People 2000 guidelines."

Dr. Rao says that the experience and research skills she gained while she was an HSR&D fellow and a Career Development Awardee made her attractive to the CDC. She intends to continue to collaborate with VA HSR&D investigators in the future.

Joanna Parker Joins Quality of Dying Study

We are happy to welcome Joanna Parker, M.A., who has joined Dr. James Tulsky's Quality of Dying Study as a research assistant. Joanna received her B.A. in interdisciplinary studies and psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1980 and received her M.A. in counseling from North Carolina Central University in 1993. She is a certified North Carolina Licensed Professional Counselor.

Before joining the Durham VA, Joanna worked as a counselor and as Co-ordinator of the Hospital Volunteer Program for the Duke Cancer Patient Support Program at the Duke University Medical Center. There she provided crisis intervention and ongoing counseling to patients and families, developed and implemented programs for patient and family needs, facilitated support groups, recruited and supervised volunteers, and was involved in research projects to determine the effectiveness and value of psychosocial support for patients and families from 1995 to 1999. She was a cardiology research technician and interviewer for



Joanna Parker, M.A.

the Duke Medical Center from 1992 through 1995. During these time periods she was also a part-time psychology instructor with both Durham Technical Community College and Piedmont Community College in Roxboro, N.C. She was the Director of Advocacy and Community Education for the Orange/Durham Coalition for Battered Women in Durham, N.C. from 1989 to 1990. She was also shelter manager for the Domestic Violence Shelter and Services in Wilmington, N.C. from 1985 to 1987. Joanna has extensive volunteer experience as a bereavement support group facilitator and trainer as well as in non-profit domestic violence organizations.

Recent Articles by Our Researchers

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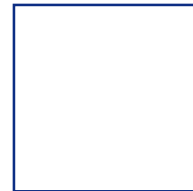
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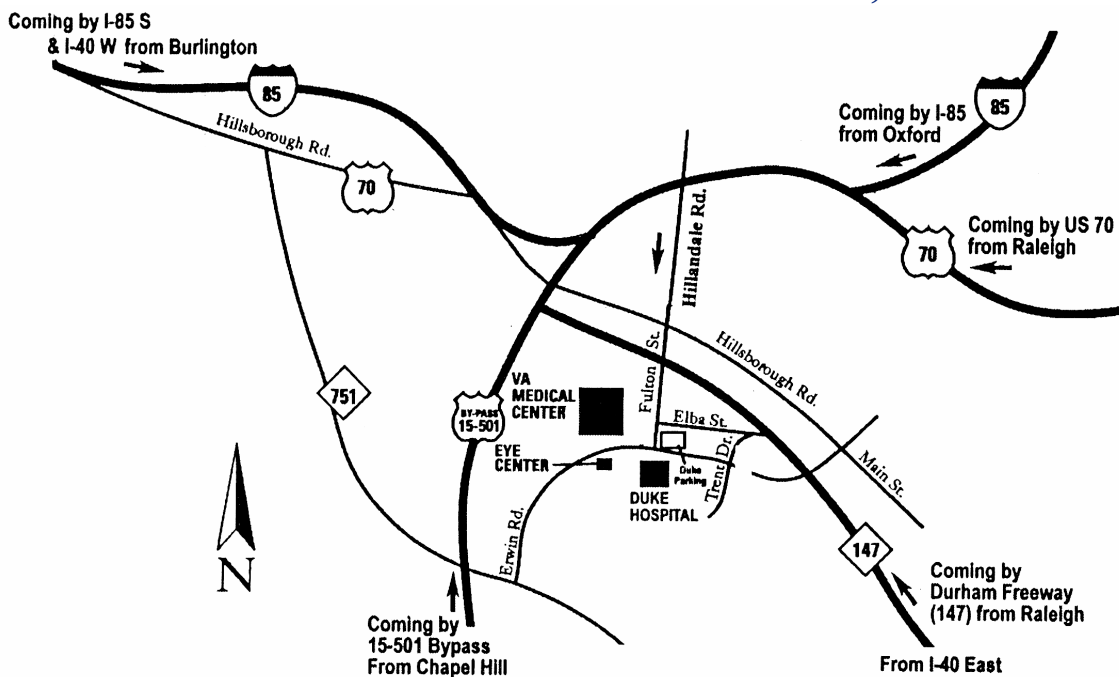
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ICER Update is published quarterly by the Health Services Research and Development Service, Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Durham. For questions or comments contact Ed Cockrell, Administrative Officer, VAMC (152), 508 Fulton Street, Durham NC, 27705. Telephone: (919) 286-6936, Fax: (919) 416-5836. E-mail: COCKR001@mc.duke.edu Web Page: <http://hsrd.durham.med.va.gov/>

The Institute's mission is to provide quality information on issues regarding the organization, financing, and delivery of veterans' health care, and to build the epidemiological capacity of the Veterans Health Administration through the generation, synthesis, and dissemination of epidemiological information. The Institute also has a mission to educate health professionals through a spectrum of training grants in the techniques of health services and epidemiological research.